

# SEATTLE DOWNTOWN PARKS AND PUBLIC SPACES TASK FORCE

## TASK FORCE MEETING #12 SUMMARY: SEPTEMBER 30, 2005

### Task Force Members

Ken Bounds, Co-chair  
Kate Joncas, Co-chair  
Catherine Stanford, Co-chair (absent)  
Bruce Bentley  
David Brewster  
B.J. Brooks  
Tina Bueche  
Jordan Royer (absent)  
Ron Sher

### Parks & Rec/MID Staff

Greg Bucasas  
Eric Friedli  
Grace Paris  
Victoria Schoenburg  
Korie Voorheis  
Christopher Williams  
Anita Woo

### Consultants

Bonnie Berk  
Michael Regnier

### **Welcome and Overview**

Ken Bounds opened the meeting and welcomed attendees. Bonnie Berk reviewed the meeting agenda.

### **Downtown Parks Funding Issues and Challenges**

Ken Bounds began the discussion with a summary of the components and history of Parks & Recreation funding:

#### **Budget Components**

*General Fund.* Appropriations from the City's General Fund make up a large share of Parks' annual budget, but Parks' share of this source has declined over time. The Department now depends more on earned income, from sources such as golf and community center user fees, and partner contributions such as capital funding from the Parks Foundation. (In 2008, changes in the City's B&O tax structure, reducing the tax burden for biotechnology companies, will reduce the City's General Fund revenues by an estimated \$18-20 million.) Parks also receives General Fund Charter Revenues, a funding source set aside as part of the Forward Thrust initiative.

*Cumulative Reserve Fund.* The City maintains a Cumulative Reserve Fund (CRF) for major maintenance needs; it cannot be used to fund operations. The CRF was begun with the proceeds from the sale of Sicks' Stadium, but few contributions were made until the 1990s, when various fund balances were transferred there. In the early 1990s, the Legislature authorized a Real Estate Excise Tax (REET), which the City uses to fund the CRF.

Because the REET is a tax on transactions, it is a steady funding source even in bad economic times. Parks competes for REET dollars with all other City departments, including Transportation and the Library. In recent years Parks has received \$8-10 million from this source. In preparation for upcoming budget cycles, Parks has identified some \$180 million in major maintenance needs.

*Bonds and Levies.* State law limits the rate of increase in property taxes that the City levies. To raise taxes beyond this percentage, the City can ask voters to lift the levy limit or approve an additional tax to support a capital bond.

Traditional bonds, which the City has historically used to fund park purchases and renovations, require a 60% vote for approval. (In the 1990s, the City also funded some park projects with councilmanic bonds, which do not require a public vote.) Levy lifts, which require a 50% majority, have been a more common tool since the 1980's, when the City found that state legislation could be used to constrain future city budgets—making it possible to promise voters that new revenues would be used for specified projects. Lifted levies must still remain within the maximum limit of \$3.60 per \$1,000 of assessed property value.

In 1990, the Families & Education measure was the first City levy lift to go toward operations as well as capital. Parks levies have since done the same.

## **History**

Bonds and levies have been part of the development of Seattle Parks since the beginning. During Progressive Movement in 1920's, parks measures were part of a larger movement to build public facilities, and took inspiration from the Olmstead movement to bring people together through active recreation.

In the New Deal era, Works Progress Administration workers built many park and City facilities.

There were few major developments in the 1950's. New parks were among the City projects built on landfill during this time.

Bonds issued in the 1960's funded a number of park projects. Then, in 1968, the Forward Thrust initiative brought Parks \$60 million in new taxes, which would be about \$1 billion in today's dollars. The money was used to develop a long list of park projects, including the development of Occidental Park.

Most capital investments during this time were funded through ballot initiatives. A real estate tax was in place at this time, but it was used for trucks, equipment, etc., rather than capital purchases or major maintenance. There were few new initiatives in the years following, and the City came under criticism for its ability to deliver the projects promised under Forward Thrust.

In the 1970's the City issued a bond for general municipal facilities, some of which went to Parks.

In the mid 1980s, the “Seattle 1-2-3” bond issues funded repairs and renovations of existing City facilities, including parks. Around the same time, a bond for the Zoo was passed.

In 1991, the Seattle Center and Community Center Levy passed. In 1999, a second levy lift for community centers funded new and renovated community centers, McCaw Hall, and other projects. This measure will expire in 2007.

In 2000, the Pro Parks Levy provided about \$200 million for purchases of new parks, maintenance, enhanced maintenance, and some programming. (Responsibility for enhanced maintenance is being shifted to the General Fund on a steady schedule.) The measure will expire in 2008, leaving \$10 million of ongoing expenses unfunded (including \$2.3 million to maintain new parks, plus contributions to the Zoo and the Teen Leaders program). Parks is currently working with the Mayor and Council to plan the necessary adjustments.

### **Capital Funding Issues and Status**

Korie Voorrheis distributed and reviewed a list of downtown parks capital and major maintenance projects in the proposed 2006 budget.

Ron Sher noted that the list includes piling replacements and other projects that represent general infrastructure needs rather than discretionary, park-specific requests; perhaps these could be moved from the “Parks” column in the budget process.

Tina Bueche requested that Parks staff prepare a similar list also showing what private funding has been secured for each project.

Kate Joncas asked how many rounds of Pro Parks Opportunity Funding are remaining. Ken answered that none are scheduled, but some money may become available near the end of the levy period.

Ken commented that the lesson of Forward Thrust is to tell voters exactly what projects will be completed with their tax dollars, then complete those projects and prevent future elected officials from shifting the funds to other projects. The downside is that it is very difficult to estimate project expenses beforehand, especially when new property must be purchased.

Bruce Bentley noted that a group like the Pro Parks oversight committee can be a useful check.

### **Operating Funding Issues and Status**

Grace Paris distributed charts of Parks’ historic operations costs and staffing levels, and noted that Korie’s project list also identified new operations costs associated with new projects.

Grace reported that the mayor’s proposed operating budget includes \$112 million, or 5%, for Parks operations, in addition to \$66 million in General Fund Charter Revenues. Last year, Parks generated earned revenues of about \$26 million, including \$15 million within the self-supporting golf and aquarium programs.

Ron requested staff work joining this discussion with the Task Force's previous discussions of possible programming and management changes.

Christopher Williams described how the operating budget is used:

- Parks comprise 10% of the City's land mass, spanning 6200 total acres (2700 of which are developed) and 42 acres downtown. These figures do not include Seattle Center, which covers approximately the same acreage as all other downtown parks.
- Parks emphasizes the intensive care of living assets, but downtown parks are generally covered by hard surfaces.
- The Pro Parks Levy funds enhanced maintenance crews, which work 11a.m. to 7:30p.m. Maintenance crews are assigned to routes, cleaning a park and then returning less than 2 hours later to clean it again.
- About 78% of the Parks maintenance budget goes to labor, including temporary labor during March through September. Non-labor expenses include fuel and equipment. The maintenance budget and the cost and staffing charts do not include the work of Parks' "shops," which include plumbing, electrical, horticulture and graffiti removal.

Ken commented that Parks' basic philosophy is to provide equitable maintenance across systems; this is not the same as equal budget, as some parks are more expensive to maintain than others. Directing additional maintenance to downtown parks may raise objections from the neighborhoods, although matching funds, the adopt-a-park program and Friends Of groups are all leveraged to improve neighborhood parks.

Tina asked whether citizens assigned to perform community service could help maintain downtown parks. Christopher replied that Parks has tried this before; sometimes it has worked, sometime not. Who provides supervision is a labor concern—and more generally, enhancing maintenance in a way that is acceptable to labor can be a challenge.

Ron asked whether Department of Neighborhood (DON) matching funds could be applied to downtown Parks. Kate said that this source has not been particularly receptive to downtown projects, so downtown groups have stopped making many applications.

Eric Friedli noted that programming is another budget component. The budget for downtown programming has been close to nonexistent until this year, when around \$10,000 was budgeted for tables, chairs and a staff member at Freeway Park. This budget will increase next year, and will be spread among more downtown parks.

## **Public and Private Open Spaces in Downtown**

Bonnie reminded the Task Force of its previous discussion of downtown opens spaces and solicited thoughts on the draft recommendations (distributed with the meeting agenda).

Kate reported that City Council members have told her of citizens being asked to leave purportedly public open spaces. She asked whether all the spaces on the downtown opens spaces roster are legally required to be open to the public. This was unclear; Kate agreed to look into it.

B.J. Brooks commented that there is future work to be done on this topic; a broad statement of priority could be included in the downtown parks report, directing another, future study. Task Force members expressed interest in continuing to look at this issue, once a clean list of the public open spaces is available.

Task Force discussion of open spaces continued:

- Perhaps Parks staff could visit the downtown open spaces to judge how open they are.
- One aspect of being open to the public is providing public restrooms.
- Downtown open spaces should be places of respite, safety and conviviality,
- with places to sit; an unwelcoming public space might as well not be public.
- Open spaces offer many opportunities; private owners can drive business by providing programming, chairs, security, etc.
- Manhattan is full of small, restful places. These are lacking in downtown Seattle.
- A forum to communicate with property managers would be helpful.
- A parks management entity would need some capacity to cut through red tape in order to make such a thing happen.
- Treating downtown as a cultural district could provide a broader mandate.
- Let's consider public streets and sidewalks also. An occasional street closure, similar to what happens monthly on Lake Washington Boulevard, could help activate downtown.
  - Vendors and the Art Museum could get involved.
  - Selecting an appropriate will be tricky. First Avenue is a possibility.
  - Downtown is too big an area. This event could rotate around different parts of downtown.
  - This sort of event must be ongoing to work.
- A parks management entity could also be charged with looking at private open spaces and non-park programming, e.g. sidewalk chalk art, busking. Its director could be a downtown "vitality czar."
- A budget for marketing and advertising will be needed.

## Next Meetings

Friday, Oct. 14	8:00 a.m.
Friday, Oct. 28	8:00 a.m.
Celebration	TBD